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ABSTRACT

Interviews were conducted with 45 members of the Arizona Indian community and 34 non-Indian teachers employed at schools where the majority of students are American Indians to examine variables involved in identifying and providing programs for gifted Indian children. Ss were asked a series of questions regarding definitions and characteristics of gifted individuals in their tribe's culture and appropriate identification procedures. Three degrees of adherence to the Indian way of life were noted: (1) Indians who have rejected most aspects of their culture, (2) Indians who practice many traditional ways while also participating in non-Indian cultural experiences, and (3) Indians from homes where the traditional Indian way of life is strictly practiced. The existence of a non-competition ethic among members of the Indian population was acknowledged by many, principally those with strong traditional cultural ties. The concept of giftedness as it is commonly known among non-Indians is largely foreign to traditional Indian culture, and examples of talents and special abilities were references to functional behavior. Guidelines for identification are suggested, including the use of instruments that provide for nonverbal and verbal responses and the application of informal assessment strategies. Instructional program suggestions include an emphasis on one-to-one services rather than identifiable classes for the gifted and provisions for continued stress on basic skill development, particularly language skills. (CL)

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Cultural and Educational Variables Involved in Identifying and Educating Gifted and Talented American Indian Children

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Paper Presented at the Gifted Minorities Conference in Tucson, Arizona, June 12, 1982.

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Cultural and Educational Variables Involved in Identifying and Educating Gifted and Talented American Indian Children

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Introduction

Gifted and talented American Indian children are among the most neglected and ignored students in this country's schools. Millions are spent each year on remedial programs for their peers while we fail to make an effort to help gifted Indian children develop to their full potential. Renzulli (1973) points out that, "...we have generally overlooked the talent potential that exists in lower socioeconomic and minority group youngsters." He states that, "there can be little doubt that our nation's largest untapped source of human intelligence and creativity is to be found in the lower socioeconomic levels..." Only one tenth of one percent (0.1%) of those included in Terman's (1925-1959) study of gifted children were "Indians."

Passow, Goldberg and Tannenbaum (1967) found that average drops of as much as 20 points in measured intelligence have been recorded for black children as they move through the grades. The conditions found in the schools attended by disadvantaged and culturally different children are not well suited for their academic and personal-social progress. Renzulli (1973) states that, "...even the most highly able and well motivated students from minority groups surely must lose faith in a

system where the probability of nonsuccess is so high." Lack of hope and opportunity appear to be major factors which contribute to the likelihood that gifted Indian children will fail to develop to their full potential.

This paper reports the finding of a study of variables involved in the identification and provision of appropriate programs for gifted Indian children.

Procedure

The observations reported are based on information gathered during interviews with forty-five members of the Arizona Indian community and thirty-four non-Indians who are employed as educators in schools where most of the students are American Indians. Thirty-three of the Indians who were interviewed are bachelor's degree holders who are currently employed as teachers of Indian children. Three hold doctoral degrees. Several others have completed master's degrees.

Each person interviewed was asked a series of questions related to how the word "gifted" should be defined in terms of their own tribe's culture and the characteristics which distinguish those members of their tribe that they consider to be gifted from other tribal members. They were also asked to indicate how they would go about identifying and providing appropriate programs for gifted Indian children. Specific questions were asked about the existence of a non-competition ethic and its possible effect on the identification and provision of educational services for gifted children from their tribe. As might be expected, the range of responses varied widely from respondent to respondent.

Cultural Variables

Degrees of Traditionality

Three degrees of adherence to the Indian way of life were identifiable in the comments of those who were interviewed. A high level of agreement about the nature of these groups was found among both Indian and non-Indian respondents.

Group I consists of a small number of Indians who have rejected most aspects of their culture. They usually reside in off reservation settings where they live as if they were not Indians. Their children are raised as if they were members of the dominant culture of the cities in which they reside. Identification and educational procedures used in standard programs for gifted children are usually effective with this population.

Group II consists of a large bicultural Indian population that practices many of the traditional ways while also participating in non-Indian educational, employment, entertainment and living experiences. Wide variations exist in this population in terms of English language usage and adherence to the traditional ways. Many of the adult members of this group reside in on or off reservation population centers where they are employed by the schools, tribal or agency offices or private businesses and industry.

Group III consists of a smaller population of students from homes where the traditional Indian way of life is strictly practiced. These students may speak their tribal language, most of the time, when they are not in school. The Group III family usually lives some distance from the nearest population center where it earns most of its income by raising livestock, weaving, etc. The likelihood that children from

this population will be identified as being gifted when conventional identification procedures are used is small.

The closer a student lives to a population center like Phoenix, Tuscon, Flagstaff or Page, the more likely his or her cultural orientation will resemble Group II. The farther the student lives from a population center the more likely his or her cultural orientation will resemble Group III.

The Non-Competition Ethic

The existence of a non-competition ethic among members of the Indian population was mentioned or acknowledged by many of those who were interviewed. This ethic in traditional Indian culture states that a tribal member will not behave or perform in a way that will show up or embarrass another tribal member. Some suggest that this ethic is related to a health code which implies that the person who embarrasses another tribal member who then becomes ill may be responsible for causing the other person's illness.

Most Group I members and some Group II members reject the idea that a non-competition ethic exists. The members of Group III can be expected to adhere most closely to it. Many of those interviewed acknowledged the existence of a subtle process that can be observed as early as the primary grades. They report that other students can be observed using techniques to shape the behavior of those who become overly impressed with their own ability, importance or achievement. Procedures such as telling the peer whose behavior stands out as distinctly different, that he or she is acting like "white people" or isolating the student, were frequently mentioned.

Respondents who appeared to have strong traditional cultural ties usually acknowledged the existence of a non-competition ethic while those with less well defined cultural ties often attributed use of these shaping techniques to jealousy.

The practice of a non-competition ethic appears to be much more common in areas that are many miles from population centers like Phoenix. For example, it would probably be practiced more strictly on the Navaho reservation than on one of the reservations that has a common boundary with Phoenix or one of its suburbs.

The non-competition ethic poses a major problem for those who wish to identify and provide special services for gifted Indian children. The students may be reluctant to be singled out as ones who are more able or talented than their peers. Their parents may be reluctant to give permission for them to participate in a program that will recognize them as being superior to their peers. These concerns can be expected to be most pronounced among the more traditionally oriented members of Group II and members of Group III.

Assimilation-Accommodation Pattern Differences

Piaget suggested in 1950 that intellectual growth occurs as a result of a person's efforts to cope with pressures their environment makes upon them to change and as a result of their own efforts to change their environment.

He referred to the changes which occur in the learner as a result of environmental pressures as accommodation. Those changes that occur as a result of the learner's manipulation of the environment were referred to as assimilation. The traditional Indian's deep reverence for

mother earth and their belief that one should live in harmony with the environment may favor the development of strong accommodation skills at the expence of conceptual development related to assimilation experiences. This theoretical consideration would be an interesting topic for an in-depth research study.

Educational Variables

Definition and Characteristics

The concept of giftedness as it is commonly known among non-Indians is largely foreign to traditional Indian culture. Many of the Indians who hold bachelor's and master's degrees in special education responded to questions about how they would define giftedness in terms of their own tribal members by stating that "they had never thought about it that way" even though they did remember studying giftedness in their college courses. They were able to identify a number of behaviors among the adult membership of their tribes which they described as special abilities, talents and in some cases gifts. Most frequently mentioned were sensitivity to the feelings and needs of others, leadership abilities and oratorical skills. The list went on to include other special abilities such as baking of bread, raising livestock, weaving, healing, and telling of stories.

These references to functional behaviors often emphasized the individual's responsibility to the sustenance of the tribal group rather than behaviors which distinguish the person from his or her peers. Several emphasized that a person can be "smart" but not "wise." They suggested that the definition of giftedness would need to be much

broader than one based on single factors like IQ or achievement test scores. The definition should provide for recognition of a wide range of specific talents that may not all lead to or be compatible with the college preparatory orientation of many of our programs for the gifted.

Identification

The identification criteria used with non-Indian children should be supplemented and modified as needed to ensure that all potentially gifted Indians have an opportunity to be in the program. Bruch (1970) proposed the following modifications in standard procedures for use in identifying gifted children from culturally different populations.

1. The primary identification criterion should be that the child exhibits outstanding powers in one or more abilities valued by his or her culture.
2. A child should measure on national norms at a bright average level or better on both ability and achievement.
3. Special consideration should be given to those children with demonstrated creativity.
4. Children who show potential for social leadership should be given special consideration.

Four programs for gifted Indian students were identified on the Navaho Reservation. Each used a combination of measures including WISC-R scores, group and individual achievement tests, a teacher checklist and the Renzulli-Hartman Scale (1971). This procedure was described as being highly effective in identifying gifted children of the non-Indian teachers and agency employees and moderately successful with Indian

children whose parents are well educated full time school or government employees. It was reported to be rather ineffective as a means of identifying gifted Indian children from homes that follow traditional tribal customs closely.

Procedures that use an IQ of 120 instead of 130 were recommended by several of those interviewed. Inclusion of those students whose achievement test scores fall within the top 5 percent of the school's population was also recommended. Most of the teachers interviewed indicated that they had one or more students in their classes whose performance suggests that they may be gifted.

Those who are responsible for identifying gifted Indian children should exercise care to insure that -

1. The instruments used to assess achievement and intelligence provide an opportunity for both verbal and non-verbal responses.
2. Adequate time is provided for students to silently rehearse their answers before verbalizing them. Torrance (1969) suggested that the instruments used to test culturally different children should not have imposed time limits.
3. Questioning procedures should be liberally used when permitted to elicit multiple responses on items on which additional credit is given for multiple responses.
4. Provision is made for assessment of a wide range of abilities, talents and creativity. Hilliard (1976)

suggested that several types of tests should be used. Clark (1979) suggested that those who excelled in creativity were not always the same students who showed intellectual promise.

5. A matrix of information is used as the basis for decision making rather than any one factor such as intelligence or achievement test scores.
6. Sufficient vigor is involved in the procedure to insure that students with high ability will be challenged before they reach the test ceiling.
7. Sufficient informal assessment strategies are included in the procedures to facilitate identification of those who do not respond well when formal measurement procedures are used.

Instructional Program Development

There is a definite need for development of programs for gifted Indian children. Those interviewed suggested that emphasis be placed on one-to-one services rather than on establishment of identifiable classes for gifted students. A resource room model was described as preferable to self-contained special classes for the gifted.

Reissman suggested in 1965 that programs for gifted members of culturally different populations need to be adjusted to insure that attention is given to their tendency to focus on visual rather than auditory material and their tendency to be problem centered rather than introspective. He also suggested that culturally different gifted students often have a greater need than others for structure and control.

Provisions should be included for continued emphasis on basic skill development, particularly in the language area. Entry into self-directed, independent projects should be accompanied by sufficient support services to insure that students are on task and making progress toward their goals.

Representatives of various minority subcultures made the following specific recommendations which are needed in the American educational system to better meet the needs of gifted students from these groups (Gallagher and Kinney, 1974).

1. The need for the dominant culture to show more respect for cultural pluralism in the educational program. The American culture has been enriched by contributions from many different ethnic and racial groups. A school program presenting only a portrait of northern European culture is inappropriate in that it narrows the view of our society and discourages children of different backgrounds from making a full contribution.
2. The need for schools to make fuller use of the resources of the total community by bringing in persons who may not have had formal education but who have outstanding talent. They could inspire and motivate gifted children of their own cultural backgrounds.
3. A need to recruit and train persons who could apply understanding and knowledge of cultural pluralism for special programs. It is necessary to use more

effectively the special talents of culturally different youngsters. Their talents are more often hidden by different attitudes and behavior patterns than are those found among the middle-class gifted.

4. There was an identifiable need to use political influence in an organized fashion to get the special needs of minority groups before the public.

Summary

Interviews with members of the Arizona Indian community and non-Indians who teach Indian children produced information which make it possible to arrive at the following conclusions about the variables involved in identifying and serving gifted Indian children.

1. Gifted Indian students are present in schools wherever significant numbers of Indians are enrolled.
2. Few of the nation's gifted Indian children have been identified. Even fewer are being adequately served.
3. The concept of giftedness among members of the Indian community is thought of in terms of the possession of notable functional skills which make it possible for an individual to contribute to the welfare of the group rather than in terms of high intellectual or academic achievement which distinguishes a person from the group.
4. A non-competition ethic appears to exist among the more traditionally oriented members of some

tribes. This ethic may have far reaching implications for those who are designing identification and instructional procedures.

5. Standard identification procedures will require substantial modification to be effective in locating gifted students from Indian families which adhere strictly to traditional tribal customs.
6. One-to-one instructional procedures which allow gifted Indian students to excel in private are likely to be much more effective than organizational plans which place students in direct competition with each other or which place their high performance on display.
7. The differences between tribal groups and the wide variance in the extent to which members of each tribal group practices its traditions makes emphasis on sensitivity to individual beliefs, needs and aspirations a must. It is impossible to say with confidence that all Indians believe or follow any one practice. The variation within the Indians may be greater than are found in the non-Indian community.
8. In depth research is needed to define the extent to which Indian students are effected by factors like, (1) bilingualism, (2) various assessment and instructional procedures, (3) the non-competition ethic, (4) Indian parent's attitudes about program development, and (5) the influence their culture may have upon the

development of intellectual processes related to assimilation and accommodation skills.

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